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ABSTRACT

Concerns about and characteristics of family/school partnerships are the theme of this issue of a "newsletter for the on-line administrator." Because of the changing natures of students, families, and schools, school administrators must take a leadership role in facilitating parent involvement in education. The six major types of involvement for comprehensive partnership programs are outlined. These include basic obligations of families; basic obligations of the school; involvement at the school; involvement in home learning; involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy; and community collaboration. Questions to be considered for organization of partnerships are discussed; some of these include the development of a written policy, a leadership and committee structure, a budget, and an evaluation process. Examples of each type of partnership that has been implemented in middle and high schools are provided. A brief program description and contact information are included. (LMI)

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THE PRACTITIONER

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A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

Vol. XVIII, No. 4 ISSN 0912-6160 June 1992

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A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

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School and Family Partnerships

Most parents love their children and want the best for them, but many do not know how to translate their care and concern into positive involvement in education. Families need more information and guidance from the schools to enable them to maintain an ongoing dialog with their adolescents about school, growing up, and their future.

The nature and content of school-family partnerships change through the years, along with the adolescents, their families, and their schools.

1. **Students are changing.** Adolescent needs and ideas about themselves differ from those of younger children. They need opportunities to develop their independence and take more responsibility for themselves, even as they continue to need adults to guide and support them.

Adolescents must balance peer relationships with adult relationships as they seek the comfort of conformity with their peers and pursue the identification of their uniqueness as individuals.

2. **Families are changing.** The family unit is changing. Parents may be older, mothers may work full-time or part-time, families may be headed by a single parent, and families may live further away from the school. Parents may be confused about their adolescents' development and worried about the problems that face adolescents in the 1990s.

Middle level and high schools must design and organize family involvement to meet parents' needs and fit the realities of family life. They must help youngsters build independence while helping parents become knowledgeable partners with the schools.

3. **Schools are changing.** Middle level and high schools are organized and staffed differently from most elementary schools. They are usually larger, fully departmentalized, and have more teachers certified for the secondary grades, educated as subject matter experts, and unprepared to work with families.

School and family partnerships must be organized to make the best use of the various adults who have important roles in middle level and high schools.

Even with these changes, the concept of partnership persists across the grades. In the middle level and high school grades, partnerships are, in fact, three-way—family-student-school—because of the increasing maturity of adolescents and their changing relationships with adults.

Family Environment and Involvement*

Parental encouragement, support, appropriate supervision and guidance, and positive communication about school and learning positively influence student achievement, grades, attitudes, aspirations, and behavior.

Although, on average, more highly educated families are more involved, families from all situations—regardless of the formal education or income level of the parents, and regardless of the grade level or ability of the student—use strategies to encourage and influence their children's education.

Studies show that parents' involvement in educa-

*For a full review of research and issues of school and family connections through adolescence, see "School and Family Partnerships," by Joyce L. Epstein, in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, 6th ed., edited by M. Alkin, New York: Macmillan Co., 1992.

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tion can help compensate for the lack of other family resources and help more youngsters define themselves as students. The benefits accrue for all students, including those from families with less education or fewer economic advantages.

The early studies documenting the importance of family environments for student success opened a new research question: If family involvement and encouragement is important, how can we help more families at all grade levels become involved in ways that help their children succeed in school?

This question guides the development and evaluation of school partnership programs with families. Research is accumulating that shows schools must take a leadership role to enable more parents to become and remain involved in their children's education. When schools take these steps, more families appreciate the assistance and become successful partners, and more students benefit in achievements, attitudes, and behavior.

As they develop school and family partnerships, educators should consider the following:

- Families remain important to adolescents, even as peers become more important.
- School-family partnership practices are declining dramatically at each grade level. Coincidentally, with each year in school, more families report they are unable to assist their children and understand the schools. Schools correct this when they implement comprehensive partnership programs.
- Most parents cannot and do not participate at the school building level, either as volunteers or in decision-making and leadership roles.
- By contrast, most parents (up to 90 percent at the middle level and 80 percent in high schools) want to know how to help their own children at home, and what to do to help them succeed at school. Studies of middle level and high schools, and of public, Catholic, and other private schools, confirm that families need and want more information and guidance from the schools.
- The social, academic, and personal problems that increase in adolescence require the concerted attention of all who share an interest and investment in children. The efforts of schools and families have not been well-organized to date. Each institution usually works separately, often without knowledge of or communication with the others.

The community also has a contribution to make, but community services and resources also have been applied without collaboration or communication with schools or families.

This disorganized delivery of services has contributed to the failure of many students to reach their potential. It helps explain the well-known and unacceptable statistics on school failure, retentions in grade, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and the other problems that increase in adolescence.

Involving families will not, by itself, make students successful learners or high achievers. That takes the hard work of teachers, administrators, and the students themselves on a daily agenda of excellence. Nevertheless, even in good schools, more students will benefit, go farther, and reach higher if they are part of successful school, family, and community partnerships extending through the secondary school years.

Developing Comprehensive Programs of Partnership

A research-based framework of six major types of involvement has been devised to help educators develop more comprehensive programs of school-family partnerships. Each type of involvement includes different practices that are likely to lead to different outcomes for students, parents, teaching practice, and school climate. Here, we outline the major types of involvement and include a few general examples and others that may be important for accommodating particular adolescents, families, and schools.

Type 1. Basic obligations of families

Schools must provide families with information about adolescent health and safety, supervision, nutrition, discipline and guidance, parenting skills, and parenting approaches. This information helps families build positive home environments that support learning through high school. Some schools offer parent workshops and other forms of parent education, training, and information-sharing.

Families continue to teach their children attitudes, beliefs, customs, behaviors, and skills that, apart from the school curriculum, are unique to and valued by the family. Schools are enriched by the varying backgrounds and cultures of the students' families. This two-way exchange—information to help families understand child and adolescent development and information to help schools understand family life and students' needs, interests, and talents—is at the heart of Type 1 activities.

Type 1 practices may include helping families understand early and late adolescence, support adolescent health and mental health, and prevent key problems in adolescent development.

Families may want information (and may want to give the school information) about how to meet adolescents' simultaneous needs for increased independence and continued guidance; about understanding the importance of peers and the risks of peer pressure; and about other topics.

Families may want to know more about setting appropriate family rules, providing decision-making opportunities to adolescents, and changing discipline practices to support student development. With appropriate information, families can establish home conditions that help students balance studying, homework, part-time jobs, and home chores.

The challenge of successful Type 1 activities is to provide information to all families who want it and need it, not just the few who can attend workshops at the school. This information can be provided by videos, tape recordings, handouts, newsletters, and cable broadcasts, for example.

Type 2. Basic obligations of school

This category refers to the communications from schools to families about school programs and students' progress. It includes the usual notices, memos, phone calls, report cards, conferences, open-house nights or other opportunities that most schools conduct, and other more innovative communications.

It may include information to help families choose or change schools, if the district has such a policy. Schools must vary the form and frequency of communications so the information sent home can be understood by all families.

Type 2 communications help families help students select curricula, courses, special programs, and other activities each year. Information about report card grading systems helps families monitor student progress in school and helps families help students improve their grades. Parent-teacher conferences allow parents and students to meet with teachers of all subjects in efficient, productive, and friendly meetings.

Families need information at important transitions from elementary to middle level and from middle level to high school. Orientation sessions at these points recognize that families make transitions with their children, and if informed, can help students adjust to new schools.

At other key points in schooling, families need information to help students plan for college and work; to begin financial savings for education and training; to learn about scholarships, loans, and grants; and to plan for college and jobs.

The challenge of Type 2 activities is to make communications clear and understandable for all families so they can respond wisely; to incorporate two-way systems so families can initiate and respond to communications; and to help students become partners by taking information home and by discussing schoolwork and school-related decisions with their families.

Type 3. Involvement at school

Parents and others need to volunteer at the school or in classrooms, and families should come to school for student performances, sports, or other events. Schools increase the number of families who come to the school building by varying schedules so that more can participate as volunteers or serve as audiences at different times of the day and evening.

Volunteers can be put to better use in middle level and high schools if a coordinator matches volunteers' times and skills with the needs of teachers, administrators, and students. Programs that tap parents' talents, occupations, and interests can enrich subject classes and improve career explorations.

Mentoring, coaching, and tutoring activities may be particularly helpful as students' skills, interests, and talents become increasingly diverse in the upper grades.

The challenge of Type 3 activities is to recruit volunteers widely, make hours flexible for parents who work during the school day, and enable volunteers to contribute productively to the school and the curriculum.

A real challenge is to change the definition of "volunteer" to mean anyone, anytime, any place who supports school goals or student learning. This opens up possibilities for more parents and other community members to be volunteers.

A special challenge for middle level and high schools is to encourage students to volunteer service to their school, to assist other students who need help, and to provide and recognize the services they perform for their families and communities.

Type 3 activities help increase families' comfort and familiarity with the school and staff, students' communications with adults, and teachers' awareness of parents' willingness to contribute substantively to the school and to communicate with other parents.

Type 4. Involvement in home learning.

Teachers must guide parents in monitoring, assisting, and interacting with their own children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with classwork or that contribute to success in school. This involvement also includes parent-initiated, student-initiated, and teacher-directed discussions about homework or school subjects.

Schools help families become more knowledgeable about curriculum by providing information about academic and other skills required to pass each grade; methods to monitor, discuss, and help with homework; and ways to help students practice and study for tests.

It must be clear that the school does not expect families to "teach" school subjects, but to encourage, listen, react, praise, guide, monitor, and discuss the work the students bring home. This may be done by interactive homework, student-teacher-family "contracts," long-term projects, or other interactive strategies that encourage students and families to talk about schoolwork at home. Families must interact with students in ways that help them become more independent learners.

The challenge of Type 4 activities is to design a regular schedule of interactive work that enables students to discuss the important and interesting things they are learning, to interview family members, record reactions, and share written work.

Students learn that the school wants their families to know what they are learning and to talk over ideas and school decisions at home. A weekly or biweekly schedule keeps families aware of the depth of the curriculum and their children's progress.

Type 5. Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy

Parents and others in the community should hold participatory roles in parent-teacher-student organizations, school advisory councils, school site improvement teams, Chapter 1, and other school committees. This type of involvement sees parents as activists in community educational advocacy groups.

Schools strengthen parent participation in school decisions by encouraging the organization of parent groups and committees and by training parents and students in leadership and decision-making skills. Schools can assist advocacy groups by providing information to bolster community support for school improvement. Committees' involvement is important in curriculum, safety, supplies and equipment, career development, and school improvement.

A special challenge of Type 5 activities is to include parent leaders from all racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic levels, and geographic communities in the school. An even more difficult challenge is helping parent-leaders act as true representatives of other families, with good two-way communication. A third challenge is including students in decision-making groups and leadership positions.

Type 6. Collaboration and exchanges with the community

Schools, families, and students must establish connections with agencies, businesses, cultural groups, and community organizations that share responsibility for young people's education and their future successes. This activity includes school coordination of student access to community and support services such as after-school recreation, tutorial programs, health services, cultural events, etc.

Schools draw on community resources to provide parent education in adolescent development (Type 1); to improve schools' communications with families (Type 2); to increase the number of community volunteers at the school or to enlist business support for parent-workers to volunteer or attend activities at the school (Type 3); to enhance the curriculum and other experiences of students (Type 4); and to extend participation on school committees to business and community representatives (Type 5).

The challenge of Type 6 activities is to solve the problems usually associated with community-school connections; e.g., poor communications about the mission, strengths, and needs of the school, "turf" problems of who decides what community resources are needed or how they will be allocated and supervised, and other difficulties that lead to fragmented and selective distribution of services. Type 6 activities increase the knowledge of families, students, and schools about the resources they can tap in their community.

What Should Educators Do with This Framework?

Each school must decide which practices it needs to develop a comprehensive program of school and family connections. Teachers, parents, administrators, and students must know where they are starting from and how they would like their programs and practices to grow over time.

The following questions may help principals and their school and family partnership teams organize their work. Schools should ask:

- Which partnership practices are currently working well at each grade level? What are the starting points for each of the major types of involvement?
- Which partnership practices should be improved or added in each grade?
- How do you want the school's family involvement practices to look three years from now? Which present practices should continue and which should change? What new practices are needed for each of the major

types of involvement to reach school goals?

- Are the practices of school and family partnership coherent and coordinated or fragmented? Are families separated by categories (e.g., Chapter 1, Limited English Proficient, special education), or brought together as a school community?
- Which families are you reaching and which families are "hard to reach"? What can be done to communicate better with these families?
- What do teachers expect of families? What do families expect of teachers and others at school? What do students expect their families to do to help them negotiate school life? How do students help their teachers keep their families informed and involved?
- How are students succeeding on important measures of achievement, attitude, attendance, and other indicators of success? How could families assist the school to help more students reach higher goals and greater success?
- Who will be responsible for developing and implementing partnership practices? Will staff development be needed? How will teachers, administrators, parents, and students be supported and recognized for their work?
- What costs are associated with the improvements you want? Will small grants or other special funding be needed?
- How will you evaluate the implementation and results of your efforts? How will you know whether and how well the goals you set have been accomplished? What indicators, observations, and other measures will be used?
- How will you ensure that program development continues to improve practices and to increase the number of families who are partners with the school? What opportunities will you arrange for teachers, parents, and students to share information on successful practices in order to strengthen their own efforts?

Just as with other school improvement processes, it helps to have a written policy to identify goals and a plan of action. A leadership and a committee structure must be established to accept responsibility for the conduct and progress of the plan. There must be a budget for program development; time to think, work, and share ideas; and evaluation of the implementation processes and results.

Developing notable partnerships takes three to five years. During this time, schools improve their capabilities to work with families; more families become involved in their children's education; and more students benefit from their families' knowledge, interest, and encouragement.

To Illustrate

Hundreds of practices exist for each type of involvement. Today, at the high school level, experience, not formal evaluation, guides practice. Research during the next few years should improve what we know about the effects of specific practices so schools can select practices more purposefully.

The following are a few examples of how some middle level and high schools are putting the major types of involvement into practice.

Type 1—Helping families with basic parenting and building home conditions that support the work of middle level and high school students.

Marcie Brooke, Director
St. Paul Working Parent Resource Center
North Central Life Tower
Suite 520
445 Minnesota St.
St. Paul, Minn. 55101

The St. Paul Minnesota Public Schools, in partnership with area businesses, have established the downtown St. Paul Working Parent Resource Center. The center provides books, videos, classes, and other resources to working parents from infancy through the high school grades. Other districts (e.g., Buffalo, N.Y.; Natchez-Adams, Miss.) also have parent centers in their communities. Many schools are creating parent rooms, common rooms, or parent clubs in their buildings as places to exchange information, hold workshops and classes for families and students, and encourage other contacts between families and school staffs.

The New York City Public Schools have developed a series of workshops for parents of adolescents that focus on effective communication, adolescent development, stress management, college preparation, and school policies and procedures. The challenge, as noted above, is to find ways to relay information from the workshops to those people who are unable to attend.

The Albuquerque Public Schools have Chapter 1 funds to hire a Home-School Liaison in one middle level school and one high school. The liaison contacts families by phone and makes home visits to help students improve attendance and achievement.

Other practices in middle level and high schools include courses for parents in adult education, GED preparation, and English seminars for parents on topics difficult to discuss at home such as sexuality and drug abuse; and workshops for parents and teens.

Type 2—Communicating with families in understandable terms and useful forms about school programs, decisions that affect students, and students' progress.

Francis Ritchey, Director
Parents in Touch
Indianapolis Public Schools
901 North Carrollton
Indianapolis, Ind. 46202

In the Indianapolis Public Schools, parent-teacher conferences and frequent communications are major practices of the Parents in Touch program. In middle level and high schools, this means conferences scheduled so that working parents can attend; folders that include policies, graduation requirements, and students' course records; shared commitment through contracts signed by parents, students, and teachers; a computerized phone information system; and other communications.

A Baltimore City middle level school has new sixth grade students and their families attend Orientation Days on the first days of school. Activities involve families and students together for a day at the school—meeting teachers, receiving information about the school program, and experiencing classes together. Evaluations of this program indicate high participation by families and positive reactions by students, parents, and middle grades teachers.

Newsletters have been improved at another Baltimore middle level school to keep families informed of school programs and to summarize school workshops that most families cannot attend. Newsletters at a Harford County high school are mailed to some families and include timely information for high school students' courses, graduation, other opportunities.

A number of school systems have begun to use telephone answering machines, electronic mailboxes, or computerized phone message systems to give parents daily or weekly information about homework assignments, class activities, notices about meetings or upcoming deadlines, and even how parents can help students at home.

Some communications seek to ease the transition from elementary to middle level, from middle level to high school, and from high school to work or college. A Clarkston, Mich., middle level administrator calls parents of all new students after one week to make personal contact with the family and to check on parents' perceptions of student adjustment.

Other Type 2 practices include giving families advance notice about special schedules, program costs, and other requirements; scheduling conferences at home with parents who have no transportation to get to the school; and helping parents of at-risk students monitor homework and schoolwork.

Type 3—Volunteers and audiences at school to strengthen school goals and programs and to assist and support students.

Joyce L. Epstein
Karen Clark Salinas
Directors, Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)
TIPS Social Studies and Art Volunteers
Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning
The Johns Hopkins University
3505 N. Charles St.
Baltimore, Md. 21218

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) Social Studies and Art establishes a teacher-volunteer partnership. Parents or other volunteers introduce artists through 20-minute class presentations designed to integrate art with the social studies curriculum in the middle grades.

In a Baltimore middle level school, a teacher-coordinator and a parent-coordinator work together to select and order art prints linked to social studies, to plan presentations, and to train volunteers. Students increase their knowledge and appreciation of art, and parents and other volunteers are involved productively at the middle level.

Other volunteers help students research careers, locate college and vocational information, coordinate college visits, and make cassette tapes for students to listen to while they read when their science or social studies books are beyond their reading skills.

Type 4—Involving families in students' learning activities at home, including interactive homework, discussions of school subjects, and keeping schoolwork on the agenda at home.

Joyce L. Epstein
Karen Clark Salinas
Directors, TIPS Interactive Homework in Language Arts and Science/Health,
Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning
The Johns Hopkins University
3505 N. Charles St.
Baltimore, Md. 21218

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) Interactive Homework activities for middle level in language arts, science, and health, and require students to talk to a parent or other family member in order to complete a homework assignment. Evaluations show that TIPS homework can be implemented successfully in the middle grades, that families greatly appreciate the interactions with their early adolescents, and that students learn some things about their families that they would not otherwise have known.

In Illinois, two sets of videotapes for junior high parents were produced in cooperation with the local cable company. The tapes show parents effective ways to motivate their children to learn. "Critical lessons" are taped class sessions in different subjects that students and families discuss at home.

Summer Home Learning Packets were designed to provide middle level students in Baltimore City with opportunities to practice skills and continue learning during the summer with encouragement and involvement from their families. Packets are mailed home during the summer. Evaluations show that students who worked with parents completed more summer assignments, and that some of these students did better than expected on skills in the fall.

Other examples of Type 4 activities include a middle level math program that has special demonstration forms so students can share each newly mastered math skill with their families (Akron, Ohio), and curricular materials to discuss at home, produced by teachers or district curriculum supervisors.

Type 5—Involving families in school decision making and advocacy.

Jane Didear, Director, Positive Parents of Dallas — **Dallas Independent School District, 3700 Ross St., Dallas, Tex. 75204**

Positive Parents of Dallas, a parents/public relations organization, has raised and distributed funds to the 25 high schools and magnet schools in the city. Each high school's parent group has designed message boards, brochures, and newsletters, or arranged events to highlight school accomplishments that are based on the needs of the school community.

School-site management teams, advisory councils, and committees are other Type 5 activities that are becoming more common in middle level and high schools. In some communities, education organizations are established by parents and teachers to raise funds and promote educational programs for the local high school. The funds help organize and support parent newsletters, speakers bureaus, and high school alumni associations.

Type 6—Collaborations and exchanges with the community.

Roberta Knowlton, Director, School Based Youth Services Program — **N.J. Department of Human Resources, CN 700, Trenton, N.J. 08625**

The School-Based Youth Services Program in New Jersey coordinates education, health, and recreation services for 13 to 19-year-olds at 29 sites in the state at or near high schools and some middle level schools. The program has helped solve many of the problems associated with integrated services programs.

The Urban League in Lorain County, Ohio, conducts Parent Educational Parties in the homes of middle level and high school students with the aim of promoting better coordination of community services, family needs, and student success in school. These informational, educational parties for families of students enrolled in the program concentrate on increasing parental involvement in their children's education and empowering parents' advocacy skills.

The Minnesota legislature has enacted a state law that requires employers to allow (and encourage) employees who are parents to take up to 16 hours of time to be involved in their children's education through high school. This involvement can include such activities as attending conferences with their children's teachers.

The state of Virginia passed similar legislation for state employees as a model for other employers.

Many schools have business partnerships for improving school programs, students' career explorations and opportunities, and teacher internships. Other Type 6 activities include school-sponsored telephone referral to community services for teens and families; and work-site seminars for parents who cannot come to the school.

Comprehensive School and Family Partnerships

As schools work to add and improve partnership practices with families and the community, their programs become more comprehensive, encompassing all six types. More comprehensive examples include the following.

Eva Pena-Hughes, Director, Language Development Magnet School for Secondary Recent Immigrant Students — **McAllen Independent School District, 2000 N. 23rd St., McAllen, Tex. 78501**

The Language Development Magnet School for Secondary Recent Immigrant Students in McAllen, Tex., serves families of middle level and high school students new to the United States. The program incorporates all the major types of involvement, including workshops and classes in parent education and family English language skills development, communications from the school to the home in Spanish, volunteers at school, guided interactions with children about schoolwork at home—particularly writing and language arts activities, parents on advisory councils in decision-making roles, and collaborating with the community through the use of the families' favorite radio and TV stations and the local newspaper.

Parent volunteers and community aides help the schools coordinate activities; community partners provide resources to support school programs, and, in partnership with the local radio station, produce a weekly program in Spanish to encourage families to become more involved in their children's education.

Working with families that many other schools find "hard to reach," this program illustrates the reach-ability of all families when the efforts are based on the concept of partnership.

Janet Chrispeels, Director Communicating With Parents
San Diego County Office of Education 6401 Linda Vista Rd. San Diego, Calif. 92111-7399

California's statewide policy on parent involvement and similar policies in other states (e.g., Utah's Center for Families in Education) have set guidelines for schools to encourage the development of comprehensive programs. To help its schools implement state and district policies, San Diego County has developed a resource book containing practices representing many types of involvement.

The county also has a computerized telephone information system and produces a monthly television show, "Parent Hour," to provide information to parents and an opportunity for them to raise questions.

Jacolyn Burnett League of Schools Reaching Out
Martin Luther King Jr./ Middle School 77 Lawrences Dorchester, Mass. 02121

The Martin Luther King Middle School is a member of the national League of Schools Reaching Out organized by Don Davies. The school is building practices in all six types of involvement, including workshops, home visits, and a parent room or office; communications in print, by phone, and other forms; volunteers; learning activities at home including a read-aloud program; parents in decision-making roles with a representative for each homeroom to keep parents informed by telephone trees and other networks; and business, university, community, and school partnerships.

Endnote

Middle level and high schools have tended to lag behind preschools and elementary schools in developing comprehensive programs to involve families. Parent involvement is on the list of needed components in most middle level and high school improvement plans, but it is often left aside or treated casually.

Now, however, with an increasing awareness of the importance of schools and families sharing responsibility in the education and development of adolescents, and with recent advances in the theory, research, policies, and practices of partnership, the time is right for middle level and high school leaders to extend the agenda.*

* A list of publications, surveys, and materials for teachers from the research of Joyce Epstein and her colleagues on school and family connections is available on request. Also, NASSP members who want to receive the Center's newsletter summarizing new work by all the Center's researchers twice yearly should send their name and address to either author, Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, The John Hopkins University, 3505 North Charles, Baltimore, Md. 21218.

This *Practitioner* was written by Joyce L. Epstein and Lori J. Connors. Epstein is co-director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning and principal research scientist at the John Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md. Connors is a postdoctoral fellow and co-director of the High School and Family Connections Project at the Center.

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